

WAAP
WIL ABALLE ART PROJECTS

1129 EAST HASTINGS
VANCOUVER, BC CANADA
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NADA NY
SARAH DAVIDSON

BOOTH P43

May 18 - 21, 2023

Image:
Fell, 2021
Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper
17.5 x 11.75 in (44.5 x 29.8 cm)





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SARAH DAVIDSON

Sarah Davidson works primarily between drawing and painting to create compositions in which shadowy, biomorphic figures and delicate, foliated fragments mingle. Making reference to a history of discourses constructing the 'natural' world, their works investigate bodies, environment, observation, and the tangled strings which often bind them together. While they often draw directly from 'nature', their drawings diffract distinctions between embodied self and other through a queer ecological lens: critters and space collapse in upon one another, suggesting a permeable web. Both the eye and the mind work towards the known--animals, plants, brush marks, lines--but are caught in a space of undoing. A question floats among the forms: who's seeing who, and how?

Sarah Davidson (they/them, b.1989, Ottawa, Canada) lives and works in New York, NY. They have exhibited their work at Wil Aballe Art Projects (Vancouver), Feuilleton (Los Angeles), Cassandra Cassandra (Toronto), Erin Stump Projects (Toronto), Unit 17 (Vancouver), The Power Plant (Toronto), The New Gallery (Calgary), and Audain Gallery (Vancouver), among others. They were a finalist in the 2018 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, and are the recipient of awards including the Canada Council for the Arts Concept to Realization (2022), and Research and Creation (2021) grants. They hold a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art & Design (2015) and an MFA from the University of Guelph (2019).



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ARTIST STATEMENT

In my art frog eyes, human eyes, and the deceptive eye patterns of moth and butterfly wings appear to look back at the viewer. This is a reversal of the usual aim of natural history, which attempts to define and catalogue the world from a distance: in the world of these works, we are caught in a web, from which the worlds around us look back. The ideas in these projects come directly out of my lived experience working as an outdoor educator. For a decade, I made a living guiding wilderness expeditions for a leadership school, teaching a curriculum increasingly centred around environmental studies and sense of place in relation to climate change. As someone who identifies as both queer and environmentalist, I became increasingly concerned with questioning and refashioning my pedagogy in order to question the values inherent in the way 'nature' has been framed in Western-indebted thought. While I often made observational drawings directly from 'nature' at work, I realized that this was a fraught gesture, and one which begs a number of questions, including: who is seeing who, and how? Who defines what is natural, and who does it serve?

My approach to reference is still somewhat diaristic, and reflects my situated experiences of place. I continue to draw from observation and integrate this into my compositions, and the work also include less easily-identified biomorphic forms. In my research, I try to excavate strands of influence for my own queer biomorphism which complicate the dominant narratives of Western-indebted art history.

In my drawings and paintings, recognizable flora and fauna mingle with less easily-identifiable bodily forms. A limitation I maintain is that the drawings of flora and fauna made from observation relate specifically to my location. Other imagery points to historical artists who worked at the intersection of ecology and art, including Maria Sibylla Merian and Ernst Haeckel. I'm critical of their relationships to colonial natural history and Darwinism (respectively), and my references aim to complicate these ideologies (taking Merian and Haeckel's taxonomic drawings and tangling them up in a confusing web of lived experience). I am also interested in artists who have used biomorphism as a way to unsettle human/non-human distinctions. For instance, the series I showed in 2019 at Erin Stump Projects was heavily indebted to Hilma af Klint, who combined Haeckel's biological drawings with diagrammatic spiritual symbols. More recently, I've become interested in the legacy of Evelyn Statsinger, who combined observational drawing with microscopic perspectives and enigmatic, surreal abstraction. In Statsinger's work, multiple perspectives and scales are collapsed within each composition, and non-human forms warp into surreal bodily references.

A number of questions propel this new body of work for me: how does biomorphism relate to queerness, transness, and painting? How can the elements of body horror in my work—like blood droplets and disembodied eyes—unsettle ways of looking at the work? How does transformation function as a metaphor or force within the compositions and installations?

Materially, I have begun to develop new supports to use for paintings, these consist of approximately 5 x 8 foot panels, hand cut by me with a jigsaw to resemble large sheets of paper. The paper is in reference to the tradition of observational, plein-air drawing (which is a point of reference for the work), but as panels, these supports occupy a space somewhere between painting and drawing.

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Sarah Davidson

Nocturne

2023

Oil on panel

57.5 x 46.5 in (146.05 x 118.11cm)



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Sarah Davidson

The Snuffler
2023

Oil on panel

31.5 x 47 in (80.1 x 119.38cm)



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Sarah Davidson

Bent Branch
2023

Oil on panel

35 x 46.5 in (88.9 x 118.11cm)



Sarah Davidson

Humans Are Like Lichens
2022

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon
and pastel on paper

53 x 65 in (134.62 x 165.1 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

Drop In
2022

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon
and pastel on paper

53.5 x 65 in (135.89 x 165.1 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

Green Mesh
2022

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon
and pastel on paper

63 x 40 in
(160.02 x 101.6 cm)



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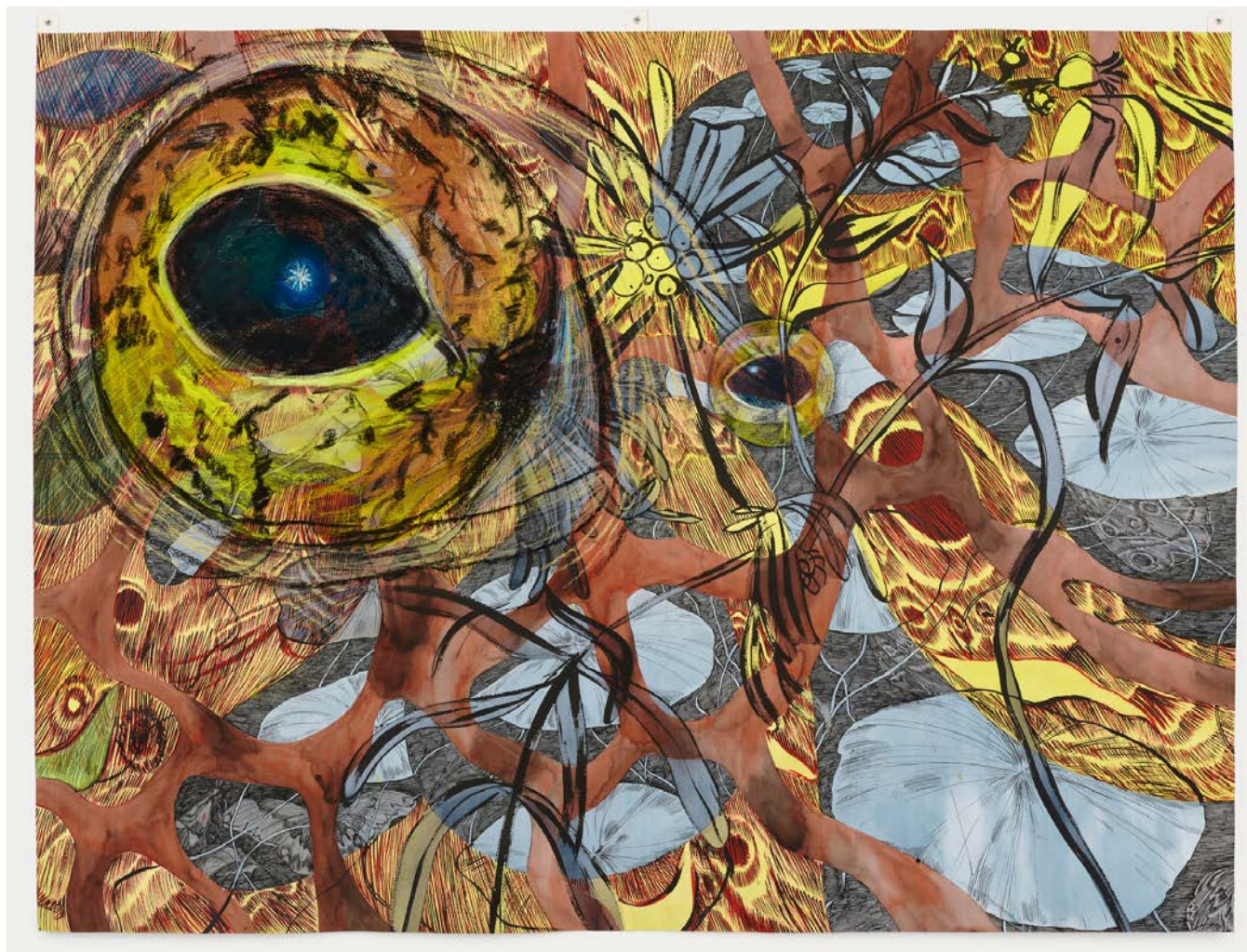
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Sarah Davidson

Amphibian Feeling
2021

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon
and pastel on paper

43.5 x 58.5 in (110.5 x 148.6 cm)



Sarah Davidson

The Organism and its Surroundings
2021

Watercolour, ink, pencil crayon and pastel on paper

63.5 x 47 in (161.3 x 119.4 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

Wave
2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

11.75 x 8.5 in (29.8 x 21.6 cm)



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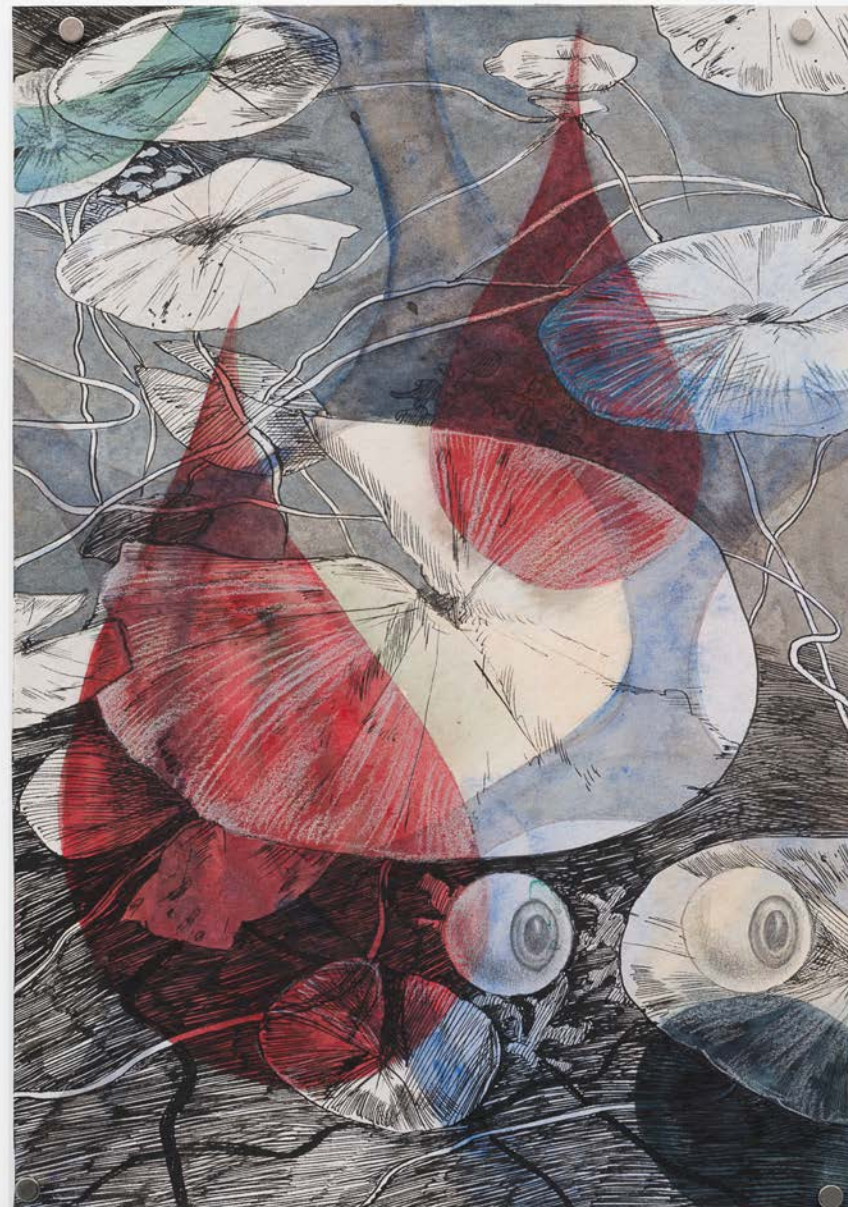
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Sarah Davidson

Boundary Waters
2020

Watercolour, ink, graphite and pencil crayon on paper

12 x 8.5 in (30.5 x 21.6 cm)



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Sarah Davidson

Look Left
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

14 x 10 in (35.6 x 25.4 cm)



Sarah Davidson

Thaw
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon
on paper

12 x 15.75 in (30.5 x 40 cm)

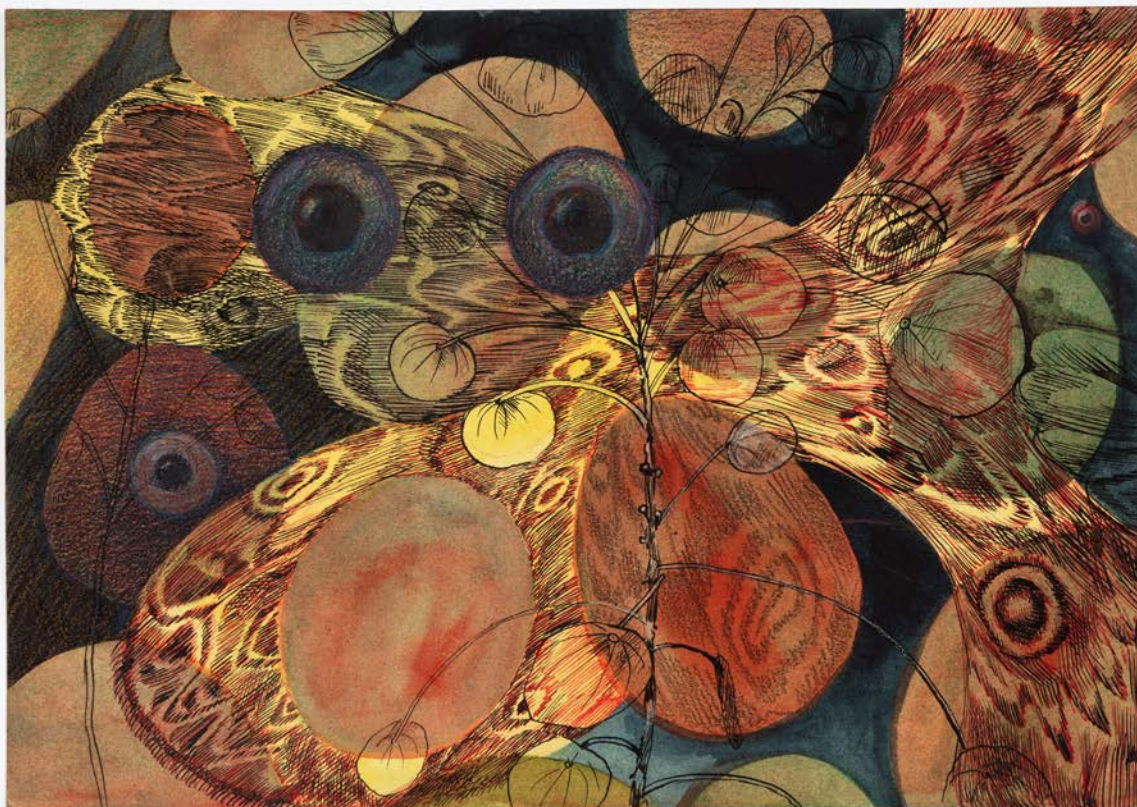


Sarah Davidson

Dark Spaces
2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon
on paper

8.75 x 12 in (22.2 x 30.5 cm)

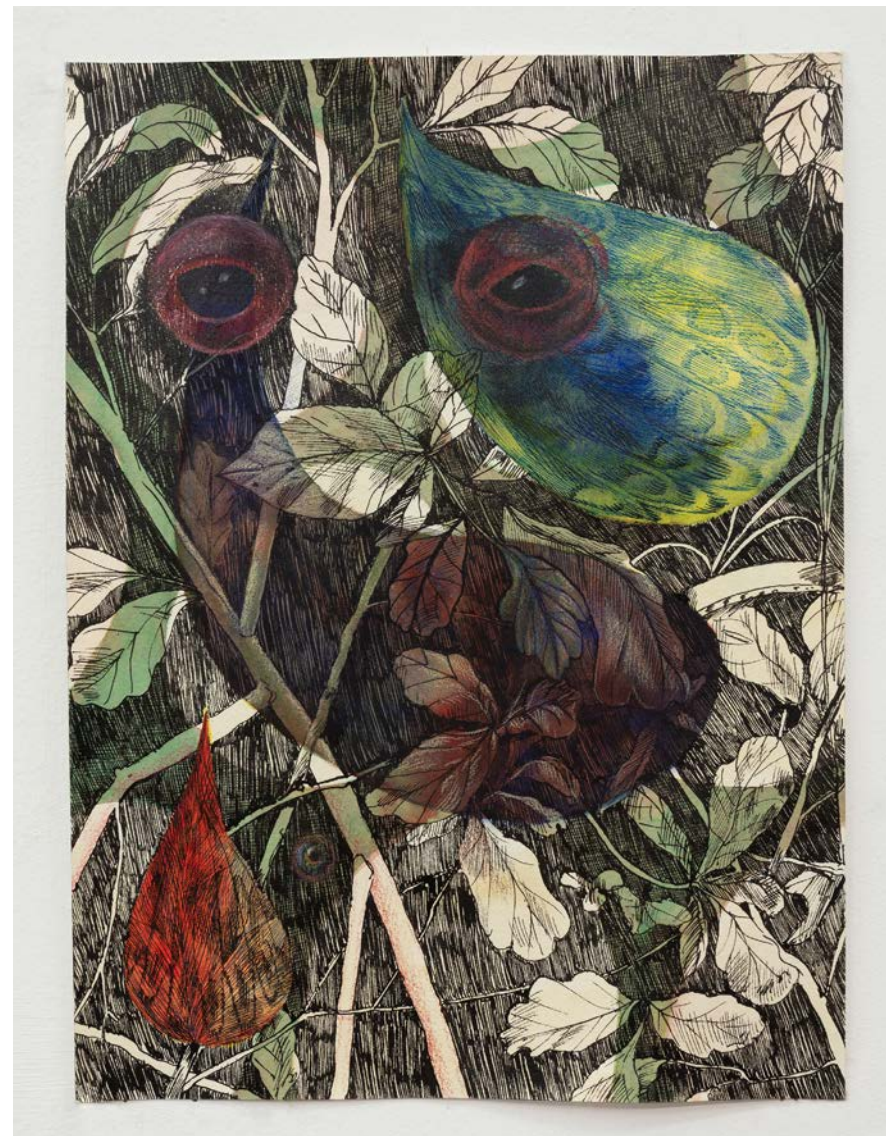


Sarah Davidson

Detection
2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

12.25 x 9 in (31.1 x 22.9 cm)



Sarah Davidson

Meshweb
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

12 x 9 in (30.5 x 22.9 cm)

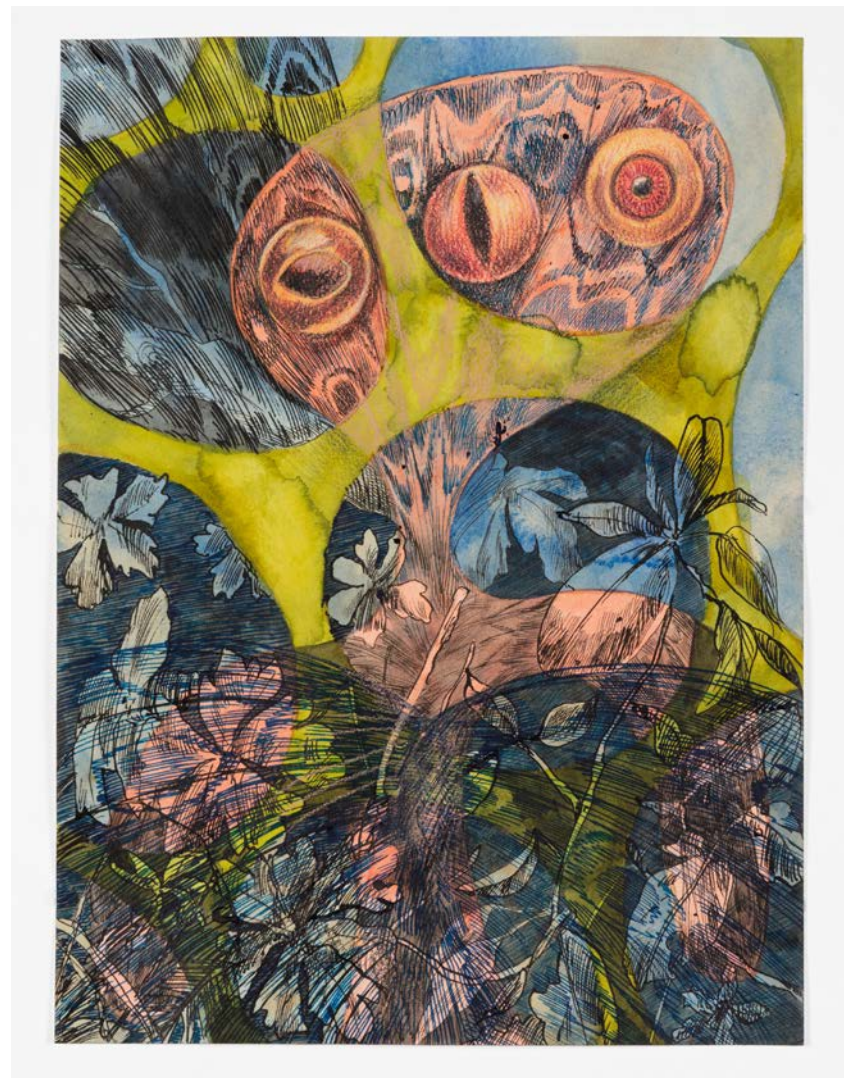


Sarah Davidson

Wide Open
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

9 x 12 in (22.9 x 30.5 cm)



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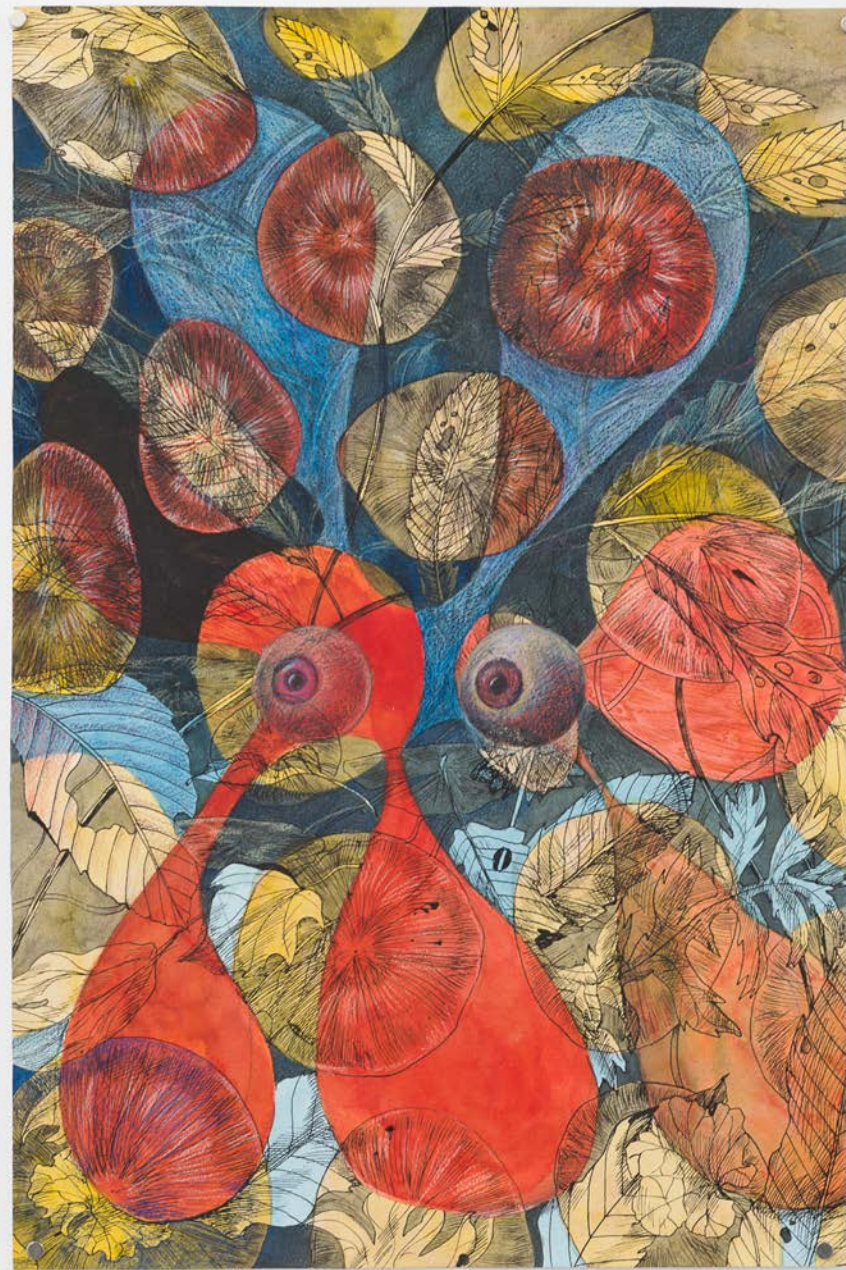
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Sarah Davidson

Fall
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

17.5 x 11.75 in (44.5 x 29.8 cm)



Sarah Davidson

Heat Waves in a Swamp
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

9.75 x 12 in (24.8 x 30.5 cm)



Sarah Davidson

Burn
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon
on paper

12 x 18 in (30.5 x 45.7 cm)



Sarah Davidson

Dizziness
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon
on paper

12 x 17.5 in (30.5 x 44.5 cm)

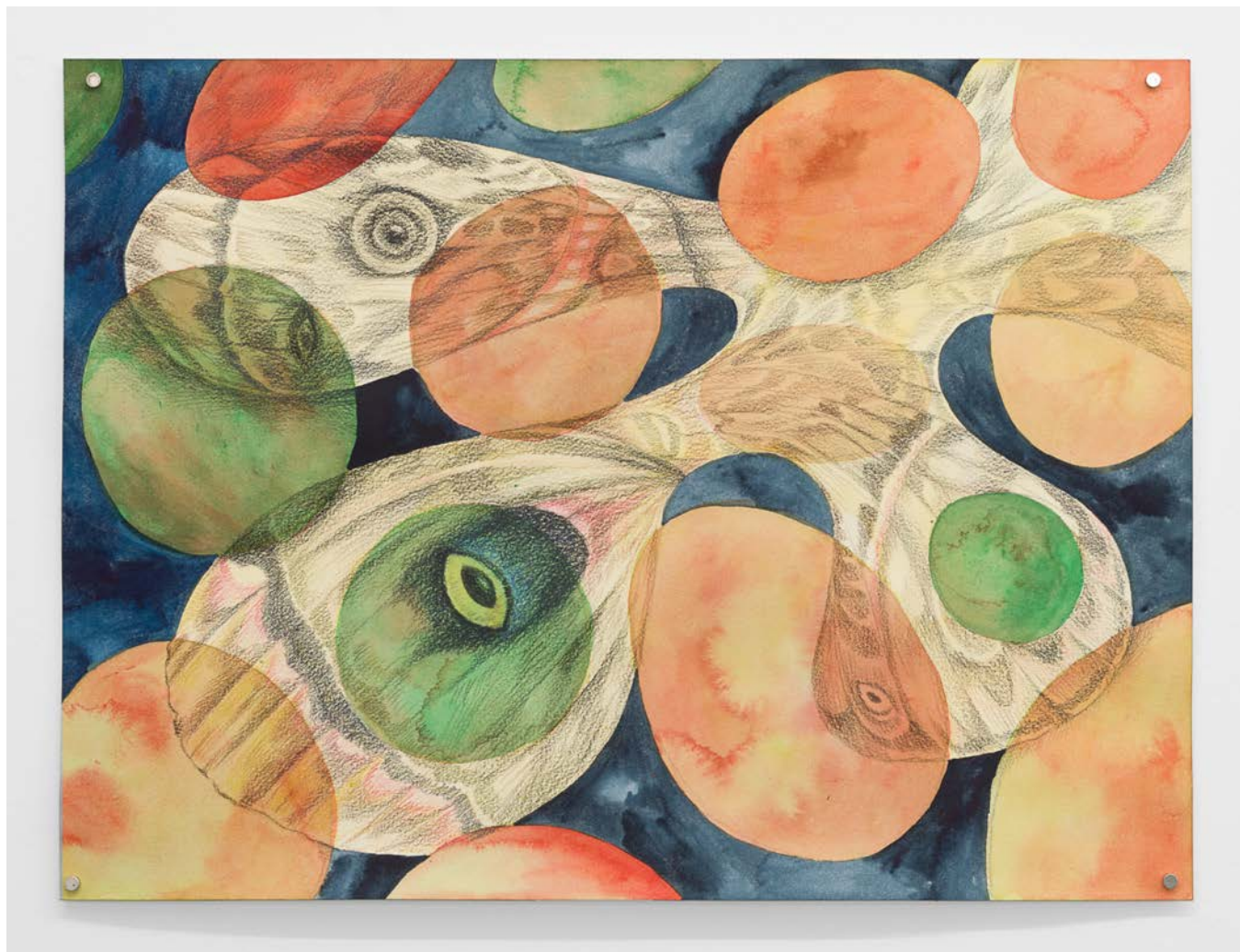


Sarah Davidson

Blob Bulb
2021

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon
on paper

14 x 19 in (35.6 x 48.3 cm)



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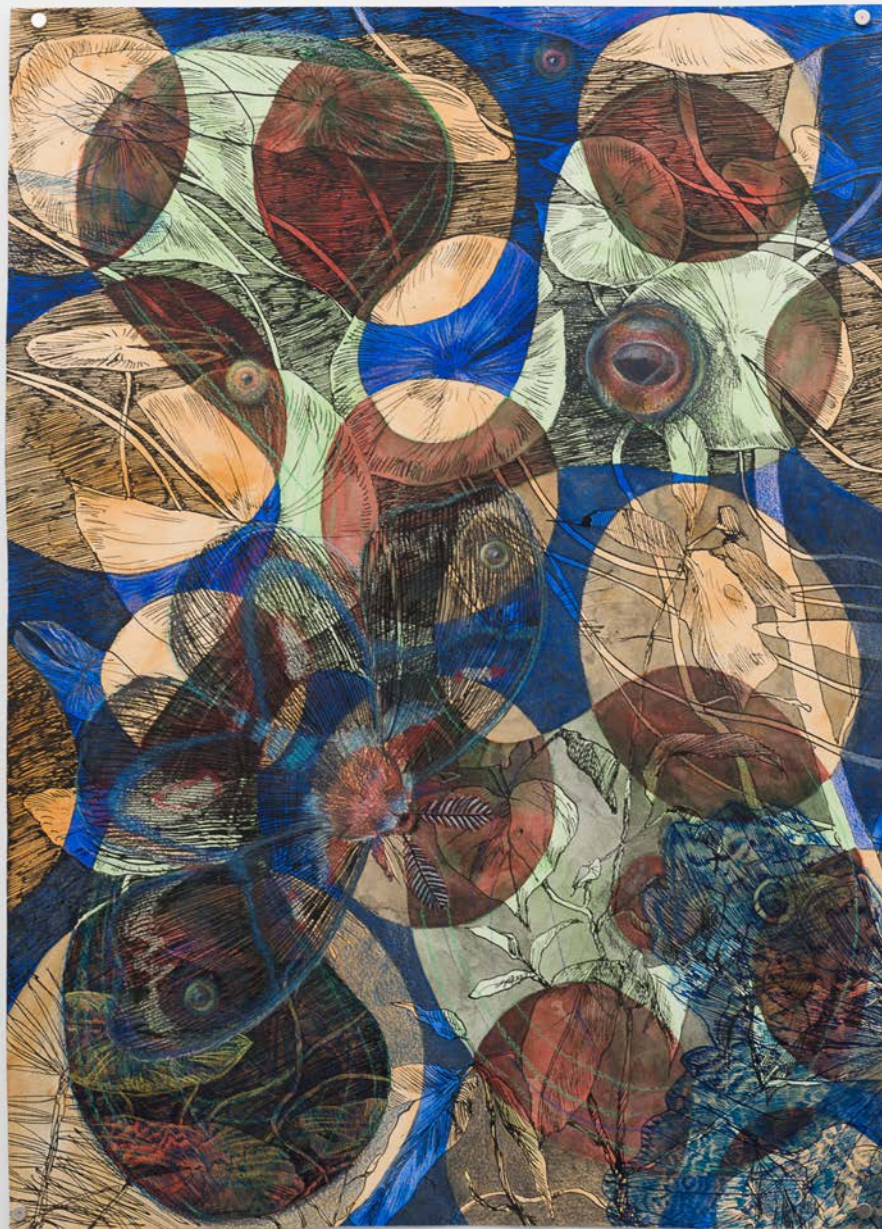
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Sarah Davidson

Saccade
2020

Watercolour, ink, and pencil crayon on paper

19.5 x 14 in (49.5 x 35.6 cm)





Sarah Davidson
Swamp Sight, Exhibition view
WAAP | Wil Aballe Art Projects, 2022



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Swamp Sight - Sarah Davidson at WAAP | Wil Aballe Art Projects
Text by Lauren Lavery

In the classic animated film, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), Alice is caught up at a maze-like intersection in the road when an echoey voice begins to sing from her surroundings. “Did you lose something?,” the voice asks. Startled, Alice looks up to find a large, crescent-shaped smile emerging from the blackness of the tree branch above, teeth gleaming like a bright moon. As Alice stumbles for words, the disembodied mouth apologetically dismisses her, and a pair of eyeballs materialize from above, first the left and then the right, plopping themselves into place above the grin, their pupils rolling around the whites like marbles. Finally, a complete figure begins to surface: vertical purple and magenta stripes form around a body and a tail, revealing a large, lounging cat.

Perhaps the best way to explain the Cheshire Cat’s fantastical entrance is by examining the aesthetic techniques real flora and fauna have evolved over time to help protect themselves from predators and to trick their prey—otherwise known as camouflage. From an evolutionary standpoint, camouflage is a tactic used to ensure the longevity of organisms. It takes various forms, including cryptic and disruptive colouration, motion dazzle, alterations in materiality, and behaviour including transparency and self-decoration. One of the most unsettling camouflage accoutrements are eyespots, which develop on many species of winged insects and birds, as well as on fish and reptiles. This form of mimicry, according to one theory, is meant to intimidate and distract predators from more vulnerable body parts, thus ensuring survival.¹ If we understand camouflage as a part of evolutionary survival, what happens when the eyes refuse to merely camouflage, but also develop agency of their own?

In *Swamp Sight*, Sarah Davidson’s recent work illustrates the possibility of this uncanny, psychedelic scenario. Each drawing features at least one amphibian or human eye with pitch-black pupils gazing out of the frame and back at the viewer, giving a new meaning to the notion of feeling watched coupled with the uncertainty of where from. Eyes, or eyespots, emerge from within the tangle of vegetation in each work, sometimes tucked in a dark crevice behind a large bug-eaten leaf, other times disguised within the sketchy confines of a moth’s wing. Davidson’s works are technically complex—their superficially flat surfaces seamlessly weave classic drawing elements, such as hatching and cross-hatching, with mixed materials including pencil crayon, ink and watercolour, to create an illusion of ethereal, murky depth. The swampy aspect of this work forms within organically-shaped fields of colour, wherein blobs of complementary colours (greens and reds, blues and oranges) envelope the foregrounded eyes, leaves, lily pads, and veil-thin wings, heightening the hallucinatory effects of the patterning and generating an environment of disruptive concealment for the bodiless beings to lurk within.



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Although bodiless, the eyes are not without essence. Disembodied eyespots pop out of bodies and wings and reinstate themselves as floating orbs amidst the weightless landscape. Similarly, petals and leaves meld into moths wings, all of which are meticulously patterned and contrastingly colour coated, thus enforcing a kind of material amalgamation that portends an agentive power. If we are to consider the eyes through Jane Bennet’s “thing power”: “the object becomes Other, when [it] looks back”². In other words, the eyes’ agency becomes apparent in this moment of looking back. The eyes are acting in the world, and are thus embodied beings, no longer inert and passive in relation to the material world around them.

There’s a moment in *Detection, 2020*, where a large red teardrop narrowly hangs from the tip of a branch, its bulbous weight seeming to sway, ready to leap at the slightest jostle. Droplets appear multiple times across the exhibition, sometimes as teardrops from an eye or dew from the humid swamp. In other works, delicate, veiny interior details could equally depict the petal of a flower or the transparent wing of an insect. It seems simplistic to describe these environments as chaotic, but in many ways they are. Davidson’s swampy landscapes are lawless, defying so-called ‘natural’ laws of materiality, gravity and even corporeality—so much so that the figures within become *transcorporea*³—assuming a “fluidity between material and theoretical bodies, challenging dualities and dichotomies. Transcorporeality assumes inter- and intra-connections, intra-actions, entanglements and transits between human and other-than-human bodies.”

Davidson’s reference points clearly include botanical drawings, but their disruption of the ‘natural’ order we normally associate with viewing this type of work further projects the eyes and eyespots into what scholar Mel Y. Chen refers to as “queer animation.”⁴ The notion of the Other, as first described by Bennet, reappears in Chen’s analysis, where Chen furthers the idea by likening it to a queer sensibility, noting that queering “sets its users up for a suitably messy governance, even an antigovernance.”⁵

If we as viewers are to understand Davidson’s defiance of the ‘natural’ order of corporeality, physics and camouflage as a kind of collective galvanization, then it must in fact be a reclamation of the eye’s Otherness, of their transcorporeality. Like the Cheshire Cat’s disappearing and reappearing form, the eyespots in Davidson’s work employ their agency to invent an unruly new world—an undefinable, psychedelic Otherworld of a swamp—in which to camouflage, and from which to look back.

1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyespot_\(mimicry\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyespot_(mimicry))

2 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 42.

3 Definition from IGI Global, 2021: <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/transcorporeality/87370>

4 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 57.

5 *Ibid.*, 85.



Sarah Davidson
Swamp Sight, Exhibition view
WAAP | Wil Aballe Art Projects, 2022



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Swamp Sight, Exhibition view
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SARAH DAVIDSON | CV

b. 1989 (Canada), lives and works in New York

Education

2019 MFA, Master of Fine Art, University of Guelph, ON

2015 BFA, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Arts, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC

Solo & Two-Person Exhibitions

2022 *Swamp Sight*. Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver, BC

2021 *Side View*. Feuilleton, Los Angeles, CA

2020 *Deep Vision*: Sarah Davidson and David Ruben Piqtoukun. Cassandra Cassandra, Toronto, ON

2019 *The Secret Life of Forms*. Erin Stump Projects, Toronto, ON

2016 *In Line, To Glue*: Sarah Davidson and Elisabeth Horan. The Bakery, Vancouver, BC

2015 *Backgrounds*. Chernoff Fine Art, Vancouver, BC

Group Exhibitions

2023 *PASSE-PARTOUT*: Charlie Perez-Tlatenchi, Claudia Passeri, Eric Mangen, Frances Seidl Chodosh, João Freitas, John Pike, Julien Hübsch, Lotte Leerschool, Sam Krack, Sarah Davidson, Vanessa Brown. Luxembourg Institute for Artistic Research, New York, NY

2022 *Sift*: Nicki Cherry, MJ Daines, Sarah Davidson, Anna Gustafson, Kumi Kaguraoka, Hyojae Kim, Nicole Ji Soo Kim, Adrienne Reynolds, Linda Sok, Sam Sundius and Gabriela Téthlová. NARS Foundation, New York, NY

2022 *Diapause*: Sarah Davidson, Brennan Kelly and Emily Moriarty. The Plumb, Toronto, ON

2021 *BLOOMDOOMROOM*: Carolina Benitez, Sarah Davidson, Ryan Grover, HaeAhn Kwon, Colin Miner, Emmanuel Osahor, Dana Slijboom, Alex Tedlie-Stursberg, Soft Turns, SUM, Susannah van der Zaag, Laurence Veri, and Allanah Vokes. The Plumb, Toronto, ON

2019 *Cognizance*: Basil AlZeri, Aidan Cowling, Sarah Davidson, Azadeh Elmizadeh, Cassandra Ferguson, Jackson Klie, Deirdre McAdams, Alexine McLeod, Jose Mora, Emily Moriarty, Ben Mosher, Caroline Mousseau, Laurence Pilon, Xiao Xue. Birch Contemporary, Toronto, ON



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2019 *SUPER, NATURAL*: Derya Akay, Maya Beaudry, Francesca Blomfield, Colleen Brown, Sarah Davidson, Fischli & Weiss, Lucien Durey, Sharona Franklin, Ezra Gray, Julian Hou & L'escalier, Tiziana La Melia, Arvo Leo, Emily Neufeld, Ebony Rose, Alex Tedlie-Stursberg, Tristan Unrau. Unit 17, Vancouver, BC

2018 *How The Wet Sock Flower Revealed Itself*: Sarah Davidson, Simone Jarvis, and Sonja Ratkay. Dynamo Arts Association, Vancouver, BC

2018 *Staring Contest Through Fuchsia Membrane*: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). Little Sister, Toronto, ON

2018 *RBC Canadian Painting Competition Exhibition*. The Power Plant, Toronto, ON

2018 *Refiguring Worlds*: Sarah Davidson, Brendan George Ko, Ginette Legaré, Maryse Larivière, Ed Pien. Birch Contemporary, Toronto, ON

2018 *Going On Without Us*: Sarah Davidson, Daniel Griffin Hunt, and Emily Moriarty. Bovey Teaching Greenhouse, Guelph, ON

2017 *Ancient Follicle Seeks Green Wish*: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). The New Gallery, Calgary, AB

2017 *Plintor Drax Lounge*: Puddle Popper (Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau). Site Factory at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC

2017 *A Cabinet of Curiosities*: Luke Armitstead, Sarah Davidson, Paul Halley and Juliana Silva, curated by Darius Stein. Elissa Cristall Gallery, Vancouver, BC

2016 *Puddle Popper*: Sonja Ratkay, Sarah Davidson, Juli Majer, Mel Thibodeau. Dynamo Arts Association, Vancouver, BC

2015 *Geometry of Knowing Part 4*. Audain Gallery, Vancouver, BC



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Collections

Burnaby Art Gallery
Royal Bank of Canada
Colart Collection

Awards

2022 Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2022 Concept to Realization Grant, Canada Council for the Arts
2021 Visual Artists Creation Projects Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2021 Research and Creation Grant, Canada Council for the Arts
2020 Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council
2020 RBC Emerging Artist Network at The Power Plant
2020 Emerging Visual Artist Grant, Toronto Arts Council
2018 Finalist, RBC Canadian Painting Competition

Public Art

2022 Swamp Walk. Evergreen Brickworks, Toronto, ON
2013 The No. 3 Rd. Art Columns. City of Richmond, Richmond, BC

Press

2022 Absence and Presence: Sarah Davidson, Catherine Haggarty, Sofia Quirno, and Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, TussleProjects
2022 Sarah Davidson at Wil Aballe Art Projects, Art Viewer
2021 Artist Feature, Art Maze Magazine, issue 25
2021 Artist Feature, Peripheral Review 2020-2021 Print Publication
2021 Puddle Popper, Discorder Magazine, September/October 2021
2021 BLOOMDOOMROOM: Face to Face with the Slow Apocalypse, Femme Art Review
2021 BLOOMDOOMROOM at the plumb, Art Viewer
2021 Sarah Davidson at Feuilleton, Art Viewer
2020 Deep Vision: Sarah Davidson and David Ruben Piqtoukun, Terremoto
2019 Review: Cognizance, Birch Contemporary, Toronto, Canadian Art
2019 Sarah Davidson's Woven World, Indoor Recess

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2019 SUPER, NATURAL at Unit 17, Vancouver, Mousse Magazine
2019 Five Cool Art Shows We're Looking Forward to Checking Out in Vancouver (SUPER, NATURAL), Scout Magazine
2019 Editor's Pick (SUPER, NATURAL), Art Agenda, Canadian Art
2018 Editor's Pick (How The Wet Sock Flower Revealed Itself), Art Agenda, Canadian Art
2018 'Staring Contest Through Fuchsia Membrane' at Little Sister Gallery, TZVETNIK
2018 Meet September's Featured Artist, SAD Magazine
2018 Sarah Davidson and Aimée Henny Brown on Fragments, Femme Art Review
2018 Review: Refiguring Worlds / Birch Contemporary, ARTORONTO
2018 Finalists Announced for RBC Canadian Painting Competition, Canadian Art
2018 MFA students explore the life of plants in Going On Without Us, The Ontarion, March 15, 2018
2017 Must-Sees This Week: November 9 to 15, 2017, Canadian Art
2017 Must-Sees This Week: November 9 to 15, 2017, Canadian Art
2016 Artist Interview Series: Sarah Davidson, The Volumes Project
2016 Print's charming for reinvigorated zine scene, Vancouver Courier, December 20, 2016
2016 Elisabeth Horan & Sarah Davidson, The Bakery: Conversations
2016 Artist Portfolio: Sarah Davidson, Kolaj Magazine, October 2016
2015 Sarah Davidson's "Nothing AZ", Scout Magazine
2015 Review: Intuition (Sarah Davidson and Linton Murphy), Broken Pencil Magazine, Issue 66
2014 The Opening: Print Ready, Vancouver is Awesome

Residencies

2022 International Artist in Residency Program, New York Art Residency and Studios (NARS) Foundation, Brooklyn, USA
2022 Artist in Residence: Ecologies of Precarious Abundance: Queer Life and Natures, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Banff, Canada
2020 Late Winter Banff Artist in Residence (BAiR), Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Banff, Canada
2016, Artist in Residence, AiR Sandnes, Sandnes, Norway